

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 04368 311130Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SY-05 MCT-02 SAA-01 PM-05 NSC-05
SP-02 SS-15 L-03 CIAE-00 INR-10 NSAE-00 PA-01
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R 310957Z JUL 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9002
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
SECDEF
DIA

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 4368

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: PINT, SY
SUBJECT: PROMINENT ALAWITE POLITICIAN TARGETED FOR ASSASSINATION

1. ITALIAN DIPLOMATIC COLLEAGUE INFORMED US THAT DR. MUHSIN BILAL, CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE ON DEFENSE AND FOREIGN RELATIONS AT THE PEOPLE'S COUNCIL AND AN ASSAD CONFIDANTE, TOLD HIM THAT HIS THREE BODYGUARDS HAD DISARMED A MAN ACTING SUSPICIOUSLY ON THE FLOOR BELOW HIS MEDICAL OFFICE ON THURSDAY JULY 29. MAN WAS CARRYING A PISTOL WITH A SILENCER ATTACHED. BILAL, AN ALAWITE, WAS WORKING IN THE CLINIC AT THE TIME. BILAL IS ONE OF THE MOST VISIBLE ALAWITE POLITICIANS IN DAMASCUS, AND HE AND OTHERS HAVE LONG FEARED THAT HE WAS A MARKED MAN.

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2. SAME SOURCE ALSO CLAIMS HE HAS AN EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNT OF AN APPARENT POLITICAL MURDER IN LATAKIA WHICH OCCURRED APPROXIMATELY A WEEK AGO. ITALIAN NATIONAL, WHOM SOURCE KNOWS AND TRUSTS, TOLD HIM THAT HE HAD WITNESSED TWO MEN ON MOTORCYCLES GUN DOWN AN UNKNOWN MAN ON A CITY STREET. ASSAILANTS APPARENTLY ESCAPED FROM THE SCENE.

3. BILAL ALSO TOLD SOURCE THAT A GOVERNMENT COOPERATIVE STORE IN DAMASCUS WAS BURNED BY ARSONISTS. SEVERAL OF THESE STORES WERE ALSO FIRE BOMBED LAST FALL BY ANTI-REGIME ELEMENTS.

4. COMMENT: SEVERAL WELL-INFORMED SYRIANS TOLD EMBOFFS IN LATE MAY AND EARLY JUNE THAT THE GOVERNMENT HAD MADE IMPORTANT DISCOVERIES ABOUT THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR ASSASSINATING ALAWITES CLOSE TO THE ASSAD GOVERNMENT. THEY PREDICTED THAT SUCH ATTACKS WOULD NOT RE-OCCUR. IMPLICATION OF THEIR REMARKS WAS THAT ARRESTS HAD BEEN MADE OR, AT LEAST, THAT THE PERPETRATORS WERE KNOWN TO THE GOVERNMENT AND IN HIDING. RESURGENCE OF ANTI-REGIME VIOLENCE, HOWEVER, AGAIN SUGGESTS THAT THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR THESE ASSASSINATIONS HAVE A SOPHISTICATED NETWORK WHICH CANNOT EASILY BE PENETRATED EVEN IF SOME CELLS ARE DISCOVERED AND THAT NEW CELLS CAN BE CONSTITUTED QUICKLY. ARREST OF WOULD-BE BILAL ASSASSIN GIVES GOVERNMENT FURTHER OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW IT CAN SUPPRESS ITS TORMENTORS, BUT PAST EXPERIENCE INDICATES THAT ANTI-REGIME VIOLENCE WILL SPORADICALLY CONTINUE.
PELLETREAU

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